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ABSTRACT

Ethnographic research in reading examines process more than outcomes of instruction, considers environmental factors, and studies the behavior of individual learners. There are few descriptive studies in reading to guide researchers in ethnographic research. Some aspects of planning such a study include gaining permission from school administrators and teachers to enter the classroom over a period of time, seeking the teacher's agreement on the frequency and duration of visits, assessing whether two or more children can be observed, adopting a system of recording, developing a consistent system of transcribing data so that verbal and nonverbal aspects of communication are recorded, and evolving a theoretical framework to analyze the data. Some problem areas in this type of research may include difficulties in recording interactions, having the principal researcher in the classroom during much of the recording, and expense. Some of the benefits of this type of research are that it ends the separation of the researcher from the classroom, it serves as a bridge between the theory and practice of reading, and it may add new interest and skill to the teacher's work. (Charts with suggestions for recording data are included.) (TJ)

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ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH IN THE READING CLASS

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Recently, ethnographic research has been advocated by writers concerned with gaining new knowledge of the inner processes at work in learning to read (Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Goodman, 1976; Wolf & Tymitz, 1976-77). The methodology is holistic and integrative in nature, examines process more than outcomes of instruction, considers environmental factors and, above all, studies the behaviour of individual learners rather than a non-existing "average" performance. If these techniques seem too broad to offer scientific rigour, a number of writers point to their benefits. Blurton Jones (1972) notes:

> Rigour in a science often threatens to bring inflexibility and oversimplification with it. But our use of large numbers of small observable items of behaviour as a starting point for analysis allows the descriptions of a very much wider range of organizations

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of behaviours than does for instance a series of rating scales (p.28)."

Referring to ecological studies of education as "experiments of nature", Bronfenbrenner (1976) rejects the quasi-experimental designation and its implication of a lower level of methodological rigour, saying,

> "As I shall endeavour to show, there are many instances in which a design exploiting an experiment of nature provides a more critical contrast, insures greater objectivity, permits more precise and theoretically significant inferences -- in short, is more elegant and constitutes 'harder' science than the best possible contrived experiment addressed to the same research question (p.5)."

Wittrock (1970) suggests that since social scientists and statisticians have developed quantitative methods for estimating cause-and-effect relations in non-experimental data, education should adopt them for studies "which estimate the relationships between the naturalistic environments of learning and the learner's intellectual and social processes" (p.3). He remarks that in measurement, the environment is generally ignored or treated as an error term. Bloom (1970) avers that the attempts to relate information about individuals and their environment have contributed more to understanding phenomena of learning than to their control. In research into reading processes, understanding is the first concern. Goodman lists the following requirements for good reading research:

> "Research must be consistent with modern insights into language and language learning....Research studies of large numbers of subjects must give way to depth studies of small numbers.... Real people using real language in various real situations must

be the objects of research if we are to understand reading as it really is (Goodman, 1976, p.38)."

Although the desirability of observational studies continues to be discussed in the literature, at this writing there appear to be few actual descriptive studies in reading to guide researchers in planning this type of research. What is presented below is a brief outline of some of the requirements, problems and benefits of applying ethnographic research methods to the study of reading.

The suggestions provided have been derived from a series of observational studies conducted in a Victoria school (Forester 1975 a, 1975 b, Forester and Mickelson 1976).

A number of assumptions about probable parallels between learning to speak and learning to read had suggested the use of the research methods of psycholinguistics and formed the foundation for the research. Beyond that, an attempt was made to let patterns of behaviour emerge from the transcripts of notes, audio- and video-tapes of direct classroom observations. Close analysis of the resulting transcripts provided answers to some of the questions about what it is a child does when first learning to read. It also raised further questions and suggested the need to refine the procedures of observation and recording.

Planning the study

Ideally, direct observations of the interactions between the learner and his learning environment should be made unobtrusively. Few schools, however, have observation rooms with one-way glass or hidden cameras. In most cases, the study will therefore have to be made in the classroom itself. Permission to enter the classroom over a period of time will need to be obtained from the school administration and the teacher.

Cooperation between teacher and researcher is an essential element in such extended work. Mutual sharing and trust will go a long way toward producing realistic -- unstaged -- records of daily language arts lessons.

Frequency and duration of visits will have to be agreed upon so as not to interfere with the teacher's plans. Once-a-week visits for one to two hours may yield a considerable amount of recorded data, though not necessarily all of it useful for transcription or analysis. The schedule may need to be adjusted based upon specific needs of the researchers or in response to changes in the amount of data generated during individual sessions.

Psycholinguistic research is based upon the close observation of individual learners in their learning environment. In the home, mother-infant dyads have been studied and the cumulative record of many researchers has validated individual findings. In classroom research, the temptation is to focus on a number of children. If the children are active, moving freely in an open environment, it quickly becomes clear that one researcher -- even when using mechanical recording equipment -- cannot hope to capture all of the activities. To assess whether two or more children can readily be singled out for observation, initial visits to the classroom will be necessary to establish how easily interactions between the learners and their learning environment can be recorded.

A system of recording has to be adopted. Ideally, this should be videotape, recorded with a wide-angle lens to capture not only the children under observation but the total setting with which they are interacting. Such a system also eliminates the problem of focusing too closely upon individual children, making them self-conscious or anxious.

Sound recordings -- taken with the video equipment or separately -- need to be pretested. Young children tend to have very small voices which are easily drowned out by classroom noise. Microphones suspended from overhead light fixtures may pick up the hum of fluorescent bulbs. Directional microphones or individual mini-recorders carried by the researcher may be needed to augment the sound system of video recorders.

Whether video-tape, audio-tape or a combination of the two is used, written notes will be needed to complete the records. It is advisable to come into class early to copy charts or blackboard work the teacher is using that day, to collect worksheets or printed matter she plans to hand out, and to prepare xeroxed copies of the pages from the reader which will be read by the children. Once the lessons are in progress, notations can then be made directly on this written material to be double-checked against mechanical recordings.

A consistent system of transcribing data will have to be devised to integrate the verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication. For oral reading, an adaptation of the notations used in miscue analysis can be effective (see Figure 1). Verbatim transcripts of the verbal interactions during language arts instruction may prove productive (see Figure 2). Written work done by the children requires additional note-taking on the part of the observer. When children write or spell it becomes instructive to note the sequence in which words or letters are put forth. Facial expressions, eye contact, the act of erasing, hesitation in marking a work-sheet item and children's silent rehearsal -- shaping words with their lips without actually saying them -- can all be indicators of underlying processes. For the sake of typing time and budget considerations, the researcher will

FIGURE 1

Markings used to indicate children's reading behaviour

(Adapted from Goodman's system of reading miscue analysis)

Substitution	He called his mom mother.
Omission	We (always) went swimming.
Insertion	He hit ∧ at the ball.
Reversal	"Come here," Mother said.
Reader makes long pause	John came / from school.
Word supplied during oral reading	We want to wash Lucky.
Repetitions	A line is drawn from right to left to the point at which the reader began to repeat. At this point a letter is placed within a circle to indicate the reason for the repetition.
Correction	(c) We played ball, in the park.
	(c) Here (it) is.
Anticipating difficulty	(A) Now this is ridiculous.
Fluent phrasing in otherwise choppy reading	"Oh, Janet, look/at/the/red ball," said mother.
Additions to the text or asides	"We want boots that Pat can put on." (by herself)
	He thought that it must be a palace. (Silly teddybear)

FIGURE 2

Examples of notations in verbatim transcripts

Dialogue:	Teacher:	You don't know what a hem is? - I thought you would. - Tracy?
	Tracy:	It's what you have to fix around your skirt.
Incomplete statements: or renewed starts:	Cathy:	I think it's...
	John:	I don't ... I didn't write it down.
Statements completed by another speaker:	Teacher:	Sometimes it's a ...
	Gordon:	... animal?
Spelling notations:	Teacher:	Spell "pet" for me.
	Child:	P E T.
Written work: (Whether on blackboard, in copybooks or books, underline to mark it as print)	Board:	pet peg pen
	Gordon:	pig (on his own blackboard)
	Teacher:	Look at this work, Gordon, (points at peg). Do you know what it is? - It's a kind of hanger.
Comments on visual observations:	Teacher:	Spell it for me. - George?
	George:	P E T (has han on his board, so has Nick.)
Enclose comments on visual observations in parentheses.	Teacher:	(Writes hanger on the board) Now, that says "hanger". But you can also call it a ...?
	Children:	(look puzzled, don't respond.)
Children's dictation and spelling:	Teacher:	How would you spell "telephone?"
	Children:	T L N (Pausing to give teacher time to write)
	Teacher:	Good. (writes t l n on the board) Anything else? Telephone (enunciating clearly.)
Comments or asides: Explanatory remarks on enunciation, pauses, or the like are also enclosed in parentheses)	Child:	F
	Teacher:	Good. It sounds like an "f" but in this case it's written "ph" (adds ph, then fills in remaining letters), telephone.

Verbatim transcripts like the examples shown above would be headed by the date, the day of the week, time of day, and a description of the lesson and its props.

probably need to preview tapes to decide which segments should be transcribed in their entirety and which ones can be safely omitted, containing little or no direct observations of the subject(s)' reading or writing activities.

In the case of video tapes, interactions of other children in the class may be transcribed occasionally to provide additional background information for the observational record of one or more subjects. At times, such incidental records reveal more general interaction patterns than the focus on one child at a time.

Once observations have become routine and recording functions well, there may be the inclination to develop observational instruments -- or to use existing ones -- to reduce much of the manual recording to checkmarks and minus signs. Such work can be productive to establish simple counts such as comparisons of the number of questions asked by the teacher versus those posed by the children. However, such work tends to narrow the focus of observation and reduces the chance of discovering covert processes on the basis of behavioural indicators. Global observations and extensive transcriptions have formed the basis for the successes achieved in psycholinguistic research.

Much of the recorded data will speak for itself: sequences in which behaviours emerge, discrepancies between the teacher's lessons and the child's response. However, for the analysis of the bulk of the transcripts, a theoretical framework will have to be evolved (see Table 1). In this case, too, the data itself needs to be the principal foundation. Psycholinguists abstracted distinct infant "grammars" from their transcripts once they no longer attempted to interpret the child's language in terms of their

TABLE 1

Assumptions underlying ethnographic research in reading

1. Reading is a language-learning task.

   Reading acquisition, therefore, should lend itself to study on a basis similar to that used in language acquisition.

2. At the time the child enters a reading class his oral language development is not yet complete (Cazden, 1972; C. Chomsky, 1969; Ruddell, 1970). He will continue to use his own learning strategies naturally and intuitively for several more years.

   It is likely that the child will attempt to apply these intuitive strategies to deal with written language as well.

3. A widely accepted finding in language acquisition research is that children will structure language their own way (Brown & Bellugi, 1964; Ferguson and Slobin, 1973). They deal with small, simple units at first, but the patterns they abstract and use differ from adult language.

   It is likely that units beginning readers deal with will also differ from those adults present or perceive.

4. The process of learning oral language involves considerable creative powers on the part of the very young child. He induces rules of language and applies these rules forming new phrases or sentences of his own invention (Brown, Cazden, & Bellugi, 1973; Cazden, 1972).

   Given the opportunity to exercise creative ability, the beginning reader will display the same creativity with respect to abstracting and applying the rules of reading as he did when learning to speak.

5. The thought and language of the child at the age of six, when reading instruction begins, differs from that of the adult not only quantitatively but qualitatively as well (Piaget, 1959; Vygotsky, 1962).

   It is unlikely that the child could readily and immediately adopt the adult language and thought of classroom instruction. Instead, it is probable that he will apply his own logic to the material presented.

6. Learning proceeds from within the child.

   In order to gain an understanding of the process of learning to read, it is necessary to see it as the child himself does.

preconceived knowledge of adult rules. What is required at this point is an open mind to allow patterns to emerge from the data instead of imposing them from without. It also requires persistence in the face of slow, gradual changes of the learner.

Problem areas

Even with careful planning and the wholehearted cooperation of the classroom teacher, problems will arise. Observations in a classroom of 20 to 30 children are not as readily recorded as the interactions between a mother and child in the home. The teacher cannot constantly call on the subject(s) under observation. Hence, an hour or two of observation time may yield only minutes of relevant tape when one or two children are being observed. Focus on too many children will result in an incomplete record. At times it becomes physically impossible to record everything that should be included. A classroom full of active children is an enormous challenge; one that is too str ctured may yield only minimal information on the spontaneous approaches to learning on the part of the children.

Demands on the researcher may prove more taxing than when conducting a controlled empirical study. If a meaningful record is to be obtained, the principal researcher should be in the classroom during much of the recording, preferably all of it. Close monitoring by a skilled observer is an essential element of success even when videotape is used. Yet the tedium of recording many repeated activities can lead to lowered acuity of observation. If several researchers are making observations, careful training is needed to maintain inter-rater reliability.

From the standpoint of cost and time, ethnographic research may prove expensive. Ideally, a great deal of videotape should be used, preferably recorded by a skilled technician who is monitoring both video and sound

qualities. Transcription of recorded data requires skill, time, and a great deal of patience and care. The same can be said for the interpretation of the transcripts. Of necessity, the research will have to extend over a number of months and at regularly scheduled times. Thus, much of the work cannot simply be "fitted in" during spare hours.

Benefits of global observations

The principal benefit of ethnographic reasearch may well be the fact that it ends the separation of the researcher from the children and their classroom. To the experienced observer, all too many discussions of research reveal that the author did not see the subjects and has, in fact, had little contact with children, their language and functioning in the learning environment. Paper-and-pencil records have been the principal basis for assessing learning behaviour. When the researcher re-enters the classroom, however, a new perspective will be gained and global observations will lead to new research questions amenable to experimental testing. By bringing the focus to what it is children actually do as they learn to read, the examination of natural language and spontaneous behaviour generates additional research data. As in psycholinguistic studies, the aim becomes to determine how the learner processes information.

The partnership between researcher and teacher may serve as a bridge between the theory and practice of reading. Few research findings -- no matter how significant -- are presented to practitioners in a comprehensible manner; fewer still are translated into practice. Working together in a classroom has the potential of generating a new appreciation for mutual concerns about reading. In-class research can become the impetus and model for the teacher to devise her own action research or to participate actively in ongoing work. Such a partnership should prove beneficial to all

concerned. It may add new interest and skill to the teacher's work, who will come to see reading and the children's efforts at learning in a new light. The researcher will gain new appreciation of the dynamics of a productive teaching-learning relationship.

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